

Sialkot owner eyes PSL crown, top players from Pakistan and Australia

By Mohammad Yaqoob

LAHORE: Emphasising that merit will be the top priority in team selection, the owner of Pakistan Super League’s newly-inducted Sialkot team Hamza Majeed on Saturday said that his franchise will look to pick top players from Pakistan, and then Australia.

“There will be no ‘Parchi’ system in our team, the decisions will be taken on merit and our first priority will be to pick the best players from the current Pakistan team and then to give preference to Australian players. [Moreover] Australian coaches have the best talent, and if we cannot get any best coach from Pakistan we will search for the best one from Australia,” Hamza, the owner of OZ Group, said during his first media conference after purchasing the Sialkot team at the office of the Sports Journalists Association Lahore at the National Hockey Stadium.

Hamza, who owns a business in Australia, purchased the Sialkot franchise for a whopping Rs1.85 billion at a glitzy PSL teams auction in Islamabad on Thursday.

Responding to a query regarding his team’s target in their maiden appearance in the forthcoming PSL 11 starting in late March, Hamza sounded categorical.

“We have joined the PSL to win it, and we are making a comprehensive plan to [achieve] this target.”

Answering a question whether he had any concerns about making profit after buying the franchise at an expensive price, Hamza said, “Put profit and loss aside, overall the [PSL] auction presented a positive image of Pakistan across international market and among the country’s diaspora.”

After the addition of two new teams — Hyderabad and Sialkot — the total number of participating teams in the PSL has reached eight, expanding the level of profit to manifold against Rs5 billion earned reportedly, by all six franchises in 2023.

The Hyderabad team was bought by SKF, a United States-based franchise, for Rs1.75 billion.

Interestingly, there is a great difference between Sialkot and Hyderabad prices and that of Quetta Gladiators, which is PSL’s lowest cost franchise retained by its owner for just Rs360 million.

However, all the eight franchises will have equal share from the 95 per cent of the total income to be received by them from the central pool of income at the end of the event. The remaining five per cent will go into the PCB account.

The entire amount to be received from the eight franchisees, which is estimated to be Rs6.5 billion, will also go into PCB’s account.

On whether his Sialkot team will miss their home venue — Jinnah Stadium — like Quetta and Peshawar Zalmi teams during the PSL franchises, Hamza said the revival of Jinnah Stadium would be the priority of both the PCB and his franchisee.

The second home ground of Sialkot would be Iqbal Stadium, Faisalabad.

“It is unfortunate that the Jinnah Stadium which hosted several international matches in the past had turned into a desert,” he lamented.

When asked what inspired him to pick Sialkot as his franchise, Hamza said Allama Iqbal, the Poet of the East, was born in Sialkot and this was one of the main factors which urged him to pick that city.

Furthermore, he said, Sialkot had produced some world-class cricketers for Pakistan, most prominently great Zaheer Abbas. “Our franchise would like him to be with us and play a [suitable] role for our team.”

Replying to a question, Hamza signalled that they would consider ‘Sialkot Shaheens’ as the name of their franchise, “because Iqbal’s poetry contains some special messages for the youth whom he termed Shaheen”.



MACCLESFIELD: Macclesfield FC’s Paul Dawson (C) scores during the FA Cup third-round match against Crystal Palace at Moss Rose on Saturday.—Reuters

Holders Palace suffer biggest ever FA Cup shock, City hit 10

LONDON: Holders Crystal Palace succumbed to the biggest shock in FA Cup history with a 2-1 defeat at sixth-tier Macclesfield on Saturday as Antoine Semenyo started his Manchester City career by scoring in a 10-1 rout of Exeter City.

In their last FA Cup outing at Wembley in May, Palace made history by beating City to win the club’s first ever major trophy.

They entered the record books for the wrong reasons this time at Moss Rose as captain Paul Dawson and Isaac Buckley-Ricketts scored either side of half-time for the side managed by John Rooney, the younger brother of former England captain Wayne Rooney.

The 117 places that separate Premier League outfit Palace from Macclesfield of the National League North in the English football pyramid is the most ever overcome by an underdog in FA Cup history.

“I can’t believe it, we never thought we would be in this position,” said Rooney “I didn’t think it was possible but there is that little bit of hope that anything can happen on the day.”

Palace boss Oliver Glasner was furious at what he described as a lack of “pride” and “slapstick” defending by the Eagles, who are now winless in nine games.

“I have no explanation for what I

have seen today,” said the Austrian, who has been linked with the vacant managerial role at Manchester United.

Just a day after securing his 65 million (\$87 million) move from Bournemouth, Semenyo was among the scorers as City put League One Exeter to the sword at the Etihad.

Erling Haaland started but was remarkably not among the goals before being withdrawn at half-time.

Rico Lewis scored twice, while Max Allegne, Rodri, Rico Lewis, Tijjani Reijnders, Nico O’Riley and Ryan McAidoo were also on target for City and Exeter netted two own goals.

Sunderland won another of the all Premier League ties on penalties against Everton after a 1-1 draw. Robin Roefs saved all three of the Toffees spot-kicks in the shootout to send the Black Cats into round four.

Premier League strugglers Wolverhampton Wanderers are now unbeaten in four games after thrashing Shrewsbury Town 6-1 thanks to a Jorgen Strand Larsen hat-trick.

Fullham needed three goals in the final half hour to beat Middlesbrough 3-1 at Craven Cottage, but Burnley found Championship opposition an easier proposition in thrashing Millwall 5-1.

Brentford cruised to a 2-0 win at

financially stricken Sheffield Wednesday while Championship side Leicester City beat League Two’s Cheltenham Town 2-0.

On Friday, second-tier Wrexham knocked out Nottingham Forest 4-3 on penalties after a 3-3 draw to reach the fourth round, eliminating a Premier League side for the first time in 26 years in another chapter of their Hollywood story.

Goalkeeper Arthur Okonkwo was the hero for the hosts, saving Forest’s fifth penalty by Omari Hutchinson to ensure the win, which was another highlight for the Welsh club that has climbed from non-league football to the second tier in three seasons under the ownership of Hollywood A-listers Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney.

In Friday’s other ties, Championship side Oxford United beat League Two’s MK Dons on penalties after their match ended 1-1, while a couple of League One teams moved on, with Wigan Athletic, shock winners of the 2013 FA Cup, beating Championship side Preston North End 1-0, and Port Vale defeating League Two’s Fleetwood Town 1-0.

The third round of the FA Cup is the stage where teams from the Premier League and Championship, English football’s top two divisions, enter the world’s oldest senior knockout football competition.—Agencies

Alcaraz beats Sinner in sold-out South Korea exhibition match

INCHEON: Carlos Alcaraz beat his great rival Jannik Sinner 7-5, 7-6 (8/6) to win their Hyundai Card Super Match exhibition event in South Korea on Saturday that marked the start of the season for the world’s top two men’s tennis players.

There was little to separate the two during the entertaining clash, with world number one Alcaraz squeaking ahead towards the end of both sets to clinch the win.

“We all need the support from the fans. So having the support and feeling the love from the people was necessary for me to perform my best and play great tennis like I did today,” Alcaraz said.

In their press conference on Friday, Sinner said the match would not be a true indicator of their levels heading into the new season and that both players would focus on entertaining spectators.

It was a promise they lived up to, as the largely light-hearted hit-around unsurprisingly lacked the intensity that has characterised their previous meetings on the sport’s biggest stages.

The pair mixed up their game with an array of trick shots and engaged in a number of memorable rallies to keep fans at the Inspire Arena on the edge of their seats, with Sinner allowing a child in the stands to play a point for him in the second set.

It was an entertaining display from both players, who are no strangers to putting on a show at exhibition events.

Sinner and Alcaraz competed in the Six Kings Slam exhibition tournament in Riyadh in 2024 and 2025, with the Italian winning in the final on both occasions.

Alcaraz has defended his decision to play in such lucrative events despite previously saying he would consider skipping ATP Tour events to prioritise his health in a crowded schedule, saying they provide relief from the grind of the tour.

The Spaniard has also admitted there are considerable financial incentives to playing exhibition events, saying last year the prize money on offer was a motivation for playing in the Six Kings Slam.

With the exhibition match wrapped up, the serious business starts for Sinner and Alcaraz, who will now shift their attention to the Australian Open, which begins at Melbourne Park on January 18.

Neither will play competitively until the Australian Open and the two have much at stake in the season’s opening Grand Slam with Sinner looking to win a third straight Australian Open title and Alcaraz chasing a career Grand Slam.

“Jannik, we finished the season playing together. We started the season playing together,” Alcaraz said on court afterwards. “So hopefully this season is going to be such a good one like last year. You deserve the best.”

Alcaraz and Sinner have taken a stranglehold on men’s tennis over the past two years, splitting all four Grand Slam titles between them in 2024 and 2025.

Arch competitors on the court but good friends off it, Alcaraz has the upper hand in their rivalry and came into the exhibition boasting a 10-6 head-to-head record.

“It was a close match so a little bit of tension also,” said Sinner. “We were just happy to be here for the first time, seeing something new. It made us feel at home and we felt it on the court.”

“Obviously now the main goal is in Australia. At the end of the day, exhibition matches are different, you are a bit more relaxed and also entertaining the crowd a little bit more with different shots and different actions on court.”—Agencies

Bangladesh players act normal despite controversies: Shanto

DHAKA: Bangladesh players are often forced to mask the impact of controversies in the build-up to and at major tournaments, despite how the external noise affects them, Test captain Najmul Hossain Shanto said.

Uncertainty looms over Bangladesh’s participation in the Twenty20 World Cup following a request by the Bangladesh Cricket Board to the International Cricket Council to move their World Cup matches out of India over safety concerns.

“We haven’t got a good result in any World Cup. We had a good opportunity last time [at the 2024 T20 World Cup], but we couldn’t do it,” Shanto told reporters on Friday.

“You will notice that before every World Cup, there’s some incident that takes place. As a player who has played one or two of these tournaments, I can tell you that it affects us.

“But we act as if nothing affects us since we are professional cricketers. Even you know that it affects us. It is not easy. It is better if these things didn’t happen. I think the players still try to keep all things aside to perform well.”

Bangladesh, who have never won a World Cup title, are scheduled to play three World Cup matches in Kolkata next month.

Tensions have heightened in recent weeks between Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Bangladesh.

According to several Indian media reports, the ICC told Bangladesh they must play in India, which is co-hosting the February 7-March 8 event with Sri Lanka, or forfeit the matches.

However, the BCB dismissed claims of any ultimatum as “completely false”, saying it intended to work with the ICC for a mutually acceptable solution.

“I would also add that this thing is beyond our control,” said Shanto, who has not been included in the T20 World Cup squad. “Wherever we play the World Cup ultimately, I would think that the players have to act like nothing is bothering them, and they can do well for the team.”—Reuters

Zakaria, Eleinen deliver stunning upsets to set up title clash

KARACHI: Egyptians Mohamad Zakaria and Aly Abouy Eleinen upset the apple-cart, romping to stunning victories over former world champions to set up a title showdown at the Karachi Open on Saturday.

Both advanced to their maiden finals at a Gold-level tournament on the PSA Squash Tour with fifth seed Zakaria, the two-time world junior champion, delivering a quick 11-3, 11-9, 11-4

takedown of 2016 world champion and top-seeded compatriot Karim Abdel Gawad while Eleinen romped past compatriot Mohamed El Shorbagy, the 2017 world champion who was seeded

fourth 11-4, 11-8, 11-6. The 18-year-old Zakaria had lost all his three previous meetings with Gawad and said he was in “disbelief” after his 52-minute victory over the world number four.

“It’s so difficult to play against Karim,” he said. “He has so many gears to shift to. I’m still a bit in disbelief at how well my plan turned out.

“I lost to Gawad the last three times I played him. I watched back some of those matches today and something clicked. I knew what I was going to do and I’m so happy with how it turned out.”

Eleinen had similar emotions after overcoming ElShorbagy in 31 minutes, two days after he had downed his rival’s brother Marwan El Shorbagy in the quarter-finals.

“Mohamed is a legend of the game,” said Eleinen. “He’s from Alexandria, I’m from Alexandria, so of course I grew up watching him the whole time. I’ve looked up to him so much — I still look up to him so much.

“What he has done for the game will be talked about for years and years. I wanted to show him so much respect today by giving it my everything and playing my absolute

best, and I’m glad to get through.”

Zakaria’s accuracy saw him make a fast start as he raced to an 8-2 lead on his way to taking the first game.

The second game was a tighter affair and at 9-9, two consecutive no-let and yes-let decisions were upgraded to strokes upon review, allowing Zakaria to take a 2-0 lead.

It was a blow to Gawad’s hopes and Zakaria then killed off the tie with some immaculate line hitting down the backhand wall.

Eleinen weathered an early storm from ElShorbagy to take the first game before holding off a rally from his opponent when leading 8-7 in the second game.

The 26-year-old then killed off ElShorbagy’s hopes of a comeback by racing away to a 10-3 lead in the third.

Seedings stayed true on the women’s side with the top two winning their semi-finals.

Top seed Amina Orfi of Egypt eased past an under-the-weather Nada Abbas 11-4, 11-6, 11-5 while second seed Sivasangari Subramaniam of Malaysia was made to work by her compatriot Aifa Azman before she prevailed 11-8, 6-11, 11-9, 12-14, 11-5.—Sports Reporter



KARACHI: Malaysia’s Sivasangari Subramaniam (L) eyes a return during the Karachi Open semi-final against compatriot Aifa Azman at the DA Creek Club on Saturday.—Tahir Jamal / White Star

Gill targets New Zealand ODI series after injury woes

VADODARA: India captain Shubman Gill, sidelined for much of the last two months with injury concerns, has his sights on the three-match One-day International series against New Zealand as part of preparations for next year’s 50-over World Cup.

Gill, 26, who was named India’s 50-overs captain in October last year, has largely been out of action since mid-November following a neck injury during the test series against South Africa.

Since then, he has only played three Twenty20 Internationals against South Africa.

“Obviously, never easy, whenever you get injured, watching your team play and you feel like you are missing out on all those games,” Gill told reporters on Saturday.

“When you have just been named the captain, there are so many things that you want to do and when you set out, it’s definitely very frustrating. But at the same time, you just have to focus on what are the things that you need to do in that moment and kind of build on that.”

India will play New Zealand in the first ODI of the three-match series on Sunday in Vadodara. Gill emphasised the importance of using the series to evaluate players ahead of next year’s World Cup.

“In any series that we play, I think there is an aim or a goal behind it, keeping the World Cup in mind, so in all the series that we play, it’s very important to see the players, where and in which condition they can help us,” he said.

India’s stalwarts Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma will be back in action after more than a month’s break from international cricket and Gill banked on their experience, calling their presence invaluable.

Match starts at 1:00pm (PST)

The 37-year-old Kohli and Sharma, 38, have been in top batting form in international and domestic cricket, scoring centuries and runs to turn back the clock.

Kohli and Sharma play only the ODI format after they retired from T20s — after the World Cup triumph in Barbados in 2024 — and Test cricket.

“One is the greatest opener of all time in ODIs and Virat is one of the

greatest ODI batters ever, so definitely when you have these two people in your team, it makes your life a lot more easier,” Gill said.

“And whenever you are in a tough situation, they always have been in those kind of situations and conditions many times in their life, so you can always go to them and see how they are thinking or what they would do, and that piece of information is very valuable for any captain.”

Kohli, with 53 centuries, holds the record for the most hundreds in ODI history and, along with Sharma, is among the top 10 all-time ODI run-scorers.

T20 WORLD CUP SNUB

While India are preparing for the one-day series, the bigger buzz

is about the Twenty20 World Cup from February 7 to March 8 in India and Sri Lanka. Gill, however, could not find a place in India’s 15-member squad.

Opener Gill, who has gone 18 innings in T20 Internationals without a 50 and missed the last two matches against South Africa with a foot injury last month, was replaced by Sanju Samson in the World Cup squad.

Gill said he respected the Indian selectors’ shock decision, calling it “destiny”.

“I respect the selectors’ decision. I am where I have to be and whatever is written in my destiny, no one can take that from me,” Gill said. “As a player I want to win games for my team, but having said that, I respect the selectors’ deci-

sion. I wish the T20 team the very best. I hope that they win the World Cup.”

Meanwhile, New Zealand’s ODI captain Michael Bracewell is keen to make the most of the Indian conditions ahead of the T20 World Cup.

“It’s always fun coming over and playing here,” said Bracewell, a left-hand batter and off-spinner. “A month before the T20 World Cup, getting used to these conditions. You won’t be in the same venue but in general, getting used to the nature of the surfaces that they have.”

Bracewell said he will name the playing XI at the toss but confirmed fast bowler Kristian Clarke will make his international debut in the ODI opener.—Agencies